

Colonial Colombia: Coffee, Yucca Bread and the Magic of the Past

By Karen Phelps

I'M IN A 17TH-CENTURY CHURCH LISTENING to French and Colombian artists perform baroque guitar music. Outside, cobblestone streets wind around white, Spanish-style buildings with red-tiled roofs. Bright bougainvillea and geraniums drape from the balconies.

Colombia is a gracious place. And the colonial town of Villa de Leyva is positively genteel.

For the past two years, I've been traveling south of the States. I've explored nearly every country in South America and I liked them all. But Colombia, to my surprise, I fell in love with—particularly with Villa de Leyva, founded in 1572.

In this town, you can't walk anywhere without someone smiling or offering a friendly “*buenos días*.” Every afternoon, the tantalizing smell of freshly baked yucca bread wafts along the cobbled streets. These soft, slightly sweet rolls and loaves are delicious with the locally-grown coffee.

In just one day, you can explore the town's 16th-century buildings, museums, historic churches, monasteries, and head out into the rolling hills around the town to discover 120-million-year-old fossils or take a dip in crystal-blue ponds.

Villa de Leyva is one of the finest colonial pueblos in Colombia. Declared a national monument in 1954, its historic core has been well preserved. At its heart sits the town's expansive cobbled main plaza—one of the largest in South America at 47,250 square feet.

Long popular with Colombians, Villa de Leyva was off the radar for foreigners. Now, like so much else in this beautiful country, that's changing fast, and you'll find more and more international visitors drawn here.

Located in the Boyacá region of Colombia, Villa de Leyva is just three hours by bus or car from the capital, Bogotá. And it's 45 minutes from Tunja, another large city. But while it's close to the action, you can still enjoy a quiet traditional village lifestyle here.

The town is home to a mix of people—local villagers, Bogotá residents who come to escape the big city on the weekends, many artists, and a small but growing number of expats. During the week, it's a quiet town of around 15,000 locals. But it bursts into life on Saturday and Sunday.

Restaurants around town cater to the international mix, serving Thai, Italian, French, and Spanish fare, as well as more local cuisine. Though none of it is overpriced, you'll find the best value in a traditional Colombian lunch, where you can enjoy three courses

for just a few dollars. A typical lunch includes a vegetable soup starter followed by steamed rice, fried plantain or yucca, chicken or beef, salad and beans with fresh juice to wash it all down. For dessert you may be served a small, sweet rice pudding or cheese topped with a sticky caramel sauce, which sounds unusual but is surprisingly delicious.

Because Villa de Leyva enjoys a temperate climate, about 65 F, you can enjoy outdoor activities any time. As you walk around town, pop into the many courtyards. Built in true Spanish tradition, you'll find them decorated with fountains and gardens, and they often house artisan shops and galleries. My favorite courtyard is Casa Quintero. Just off the main plaza, this indoor courtyard space is home to some of the pueblo's best restaurants and a variety of local arts and crafts shops.

Pristine hills rise all around Villa de Leyva, and they're worth exploring. Plenty of tour companies offer horse trips, and cheap taxis are everywhere. Head out of town on the road to Santa Sofia and turn off to the left just after Casa de Barro. You'll come to Pozos Azules, three deep blue lagoons where you can take a dip and picnic.

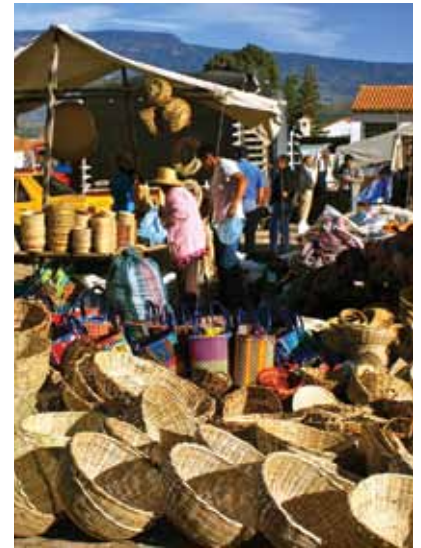
A bit farther away on the road to Gachantiva, you'll find seven waterfalls at Cascada la Periquera.

Other attractions include an ostrich farm and a museum called El Fósil where you can see some of the dinosaur relics this region is famous for. On display is an almost-complete 120-million-year-old kronosaurus fossil in the same place where it was found in 1977.

Parque Arqueológico de Monquirá is an old astronomic observatory, once inhabited by the native Muiscas. There you can see fragments of the observatory and phallic monoliths—symbols of fertility.

Villa de Leyva has a busy event and festival schedule—and they're all free. Every August, the Festival de Cometas (festival of kites) sees hundreds of colorful kites launched into the sky above the plaza. Frequent music concerts like the one I attended, as well as cultural performances, earn the town its courtly air. And each year you have your choice, too, of food festival, water festival, film festival, light festival and tree festival.

Many tour companies take travelers from Bogotá to Villa de Leyva and other pueblos near Bogotá. Colombian Highlands offers eco-tours and English-speaking guides. See: *Colombianhighlands.com*. ■



Take a leisurely stroll in Villa de Leyva's outdoor market.

“The town bursts into life on the weekends.”